

On the Subject of Black Elephants¹

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

11 June 2020

Ref: Pells, D. (2020). [Black Elephants and... maybe Project Management](#), *PM World Journal*, Vol IX, Issue VI, June

Dear David,

I have just read your Editorial article today, “Black Elephants ... and maybe Project Management,” with great interest (PMWJ [ISSN: 2330-4480] Vol. IX, Issue VI – June 2020).

Thank you for giving your readers the opportunity to comment. What you wrote was very compelling, as I am exploring this area for my research in project management and have been musing over this subject area for a little while, so it has brought a breath of fresh air back into my thinking and more impetus to get on with my research.

It all started in the summer of 2018 with a book I read by Chris Clearfield and András Tilcsik (2018) called “Meltdown – Why Our systems Fail and what can we do about it?” The context for this was at a busy International Airport in UK (Gatwick) waiting excitedly for my flight for a “holiday in the sun” only to be disappointed when an announcement was made to inform travellers on the flight that it was delayed by 6 hours. The irony was the announcement came at the very moment I was feeling pleased that I always travel with a reliable airline which had never let me down in the past 18 years of my experience in aviation travel! Apart from getting a free meal voucher as a compensator, I was entertained for the duration of the flight delay by Chris Clearfield and András Tilcsik’s book “Meltdown”. My husband bought this in the airport shop thinking it would calm me down while he entertained himself with a gripping “John Le Carré” crime thriller fictional Book. “Meltdown” was so fascinating as a practical evidence-based thought provoking book on why disasters, blunders, failures and so on, keep repeating themselves throughout history. Yet it did get me thinking as to what extent we are really learning how to avoid these meltdowns (if they can be foreseeable) and the impact it brings on society as a whole when meltdowns do take place, as well as to individual lives of those affected.

In December 2018, I presented my insights on project failure in Brisbane, Australia (at the 4th Australasia and South East Asia Structural Engineering and Construction Conference) debating how project failure could be used as a change agent in the way we educate and develop future project managers. The focus was on Higher Educational programmes in project management as the vehicle for change. I am

¹ How to cite this work: Stewart, A. (2020). On the Subject of Black Elephants, Letter to the Editor, *PM World Journal*, Vol. IX, Issue VII, July.

undertaking a Doctorate in Education and the focus of my research is how sustainable is the education that is currently provided for the project management profession, within Higher Educational institutions, based on a case study for the research. There may be some synergy with “Black Elephants” and the role education can play in encouraging our future leaders to listen more, encourage their teams to “speak out” when the early warning signs are there, and take positive action to empower their people to tackle the rampant “Black Elephants” before they cause a stampede!

I would welcome the opportunity to dialogue with you further on the above, possibly via Webex video conference if you would be interested. Looking forward to hearing from you as this might be an area for further interest for us to publish in the near future, as my research progresses.

With many thanks,

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